Cuba and Angola

Cuban relations with Angola have gone through several distinct phases. These phases have been marked by intermittent divergence between Soviet and Cuban interests in Angola, an emphasis by Havana on enhancing Cuban influence and national prestige, and generally, but not always, greater congruence between the interests of Havana and Luanda than between those of Luanda and Moscow. They also provide evidence that Cuban behavior over the years fits neither a leftist "Cuba as hero" nor a conservative "Cuba as villain" stereotype.

The Phases
Phase 1 ran from Fidel Castro's seizure of power in 1959 to the 1974 Lisbon coup that ended the long war between Portugal and nationalist guerrillas in Angola. During this period, Cuban relations with one of the three major Angolan nationalist groups, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), blossomed from a cautious friendship to a full-fledged alliance. Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, the increasing Cuban involvement with the MPLA at this early stage was not initiated on Soviet advice; indeed, relations between Havana and Moscow became uneasy between 1962 and 1968 because of disagreements over the handling of the 1962 missile crisis, the role of revolutionary guerrilla movements in the Third World, and Soviet rhetoric about peaceful coexistence with the United States. This Havana-Moscow tension strengthened Castro's desire to reach out to ideologically compatible revolutionary movements, such as the MPLA, to enhance his international influence and independence. A trusting friendship grew up between Castro and MPLA leader Agostinho Neto.

Although a 1968 slowdown of Soviet oil deliveries persuaded Castro to mend his fences with Moscow, Cuba continued to champion Neto's cause even when MPLA fissures caused the USSR in 1973 to shift support temporarily to Daniel Chipenda, leader of a dissident MPLA faction. The Chipenda episode highlighted the differences between Cuban and Soviet priorities in Angola during this era. For Castro, ideological and Third World solidarity, as well as personal loyalty to Neto, were paramount. For the USSR, the most important considerations were Neto's ability to gain power and indications as to whether he would be receptive to Soviet requests once in power. When both of these prospects became less certain, Moscow sought out alternative horses to back.

Phase 2 began with the Portuguese coup in April 1974 and ran to the consolidation, with Soviet and Cuban help, of MPLA power in post-independence Angola in early 1976. Again, contrary to the conventional view, Cuba was neither the hero nor the villain of this critical period. South Africa, Cuba, and the United States roughly simultaneously — and largely secretly — increased their involvement in relatively independent decisions during the period from April 1974 to October 1975. As the results of these decisions were seen in the field, each of the governments involved — knowing the political alliances of the various Angolan actors — speculated that the other external powers were preparing to intervene directly, and responded accordingly. Only after October 1975 did each element's plans become clear, and lead to informed decisions rather than actions based on hunches. In this period, Cuban and Soviet interests overlapped more completely than in the first phase. But once again Cuban involvement was not simply that of a compliant Soviet surrogate; indeed, it was Castro who urged Moscow to become more committed to the struggle in Angola. On the other hand, Cuba obviously could not have carried out its Angolan operation as speedily or efficiently as it did had the Soviet Union not provided arms and transportation facilities.

Why was Cuba so anxious to leap to Neto's aid during the 1975 civil war? Castro's personal relationship with Neto, the traditional Cuban desire, magnified under
Castro, to play an international role transcending the island’s small size, and the opportunity to test the Cuban military in the “real world” were all factors. Although Cuba received improved trade terms from the USSR after the intervention, and profited financially in the civilian (though not necessarily in the military) sphere in Angola from 1976 to the early 1980s, economic incentives were too problematical at the outset to have played a significant role in Castro’s 1975 decision to intervene.

Phase 3 extended roughly from 1976 to 1981. In this period the Cuban military role in Angola shifted from that of an expedient force to an indefinite presence. Planned withdrawal of Cuban combat forces was halted as the security situation deteriorated. Tensions with Zaire generated in early 1977 by an abortive cross-border invasion into Shaba province by Katangan exiles living in Angola contributed to the policy reversal, as did a May 1977 coup attempt by an MPLA faction with apparent close Soviet ties. Cuba strongly backed Neto in the latter incident, while, at a crucial moment, the Soviet Union temporarily “sat on the fence.”

As the Cubans prepared for the long haul in Angola, more precise guidelines defining their military role were worked out with the MPLA. The Cubans took on backup infrastructure and logistics activities, staying away from front line combat with either UNITA or South Africa. Cuban civilian cooperation also increased dramatically, as evidenced by the arrival in Angola of large numbers of doctors, agricultural technicians, teachers, construction engineers, and other specialists. Some stresses arose between Angolan and Cuban personnel in both the military and civilian spheres over such issues as the modestly better living conditions enjoyed by the Cubans, but on the whole Cubans achieved much better individual rapport with Angolans than did their Soviet counterparts.

Why was Cuba willing to take on long-term commitments in Angola well beyond what was anticipated when the initial decision to send an expeditionary force was made? Cuba may have been offered material compensation for its military activities, permitting it to cover costs or even earn profits, though the record is still unclear on this issue. But even if compensation was not offered, other incentives beckoned. Increasing South African military activity within Angola brought Cuba the prestige-enhancing opportunity of presenting itself as a defender of blacks against white racists, an image Castro coveted. At the same time, the growing South African military presence in Angola increased the political cost of abandoning Neto, for Havana might then appear to other Third World leaders to be leaving the MPLA to the mercy of the apartheid regime. In addition, even if Cuba were not breaking even (or profiting) on its military activities in Angola, it certainly was gaining material compensation in the civilian sphere. Finally, long-term involvement in Angola promised to give Cuba important reverse leverage over the Soviet Union on both political and economic matters, a weapon Castro sorely needed. In Angola, the Cubans were performing a task the Soviets wanted done, but were unable or unwilling to do themselves. To a certain extent this enabled the Cuban “tail” to wag the Soviet “dog.”

Phase 4 lasted roughly from 1981 to 1984. During this period, Cuban relations with the MPLA were placed under some strain by the latter’s negotiations with the United States and South Africa on terms for a phased Cuban withdrawal. The MPLA informed Havana only intermittently of the course of these discussions, seeming to put its own interest in peace before its ally’s interest in maintaining prestige. Cuba did not oppose withdrawal in principle, but was extremely anxious that it be carried out in a manner that implied Cuban victory rather than defeat. The lack of consultation thus made Havana uneasy.

The 1981-1984 period also brought a reduction of Cuban earnings in Angola, for in 1983 Cuba waived payments for the services of its civilian personnel, an action presumably prompted by Luanda’s cash-flow problems due to the increased costs of the war. (See “The Angolan Economy: A Status Report” by Gillian Gunn in CSIS Africa Notes no. 58, May 30, 1986.)

Phase 5 began in early 1985. It has been defined by the stalemate in U.S. (and South African) negotiations with the MPLA on the issue of Cuban troop withdrawal following South African attacks on Angolan territory and the U.S. decision to aid UNITA. (See “United States Options in Angola” by John A. Marcum, CSIS Africa Notes no. 52, December 20, 1985.)

Although the 1985-1987 period has been marked by diplomatic paralysis, there has been some motion in MPLA and Cuban attitudes on withdrawal. For most of 1986, Cuban and MPLA positions were united in a hard-line stance. Whereas the two countries had previously tied withdrawal to the achievement of internationally recognized independence for Namibia and an end to South African support for UNITA, they now asserted that withdrawal would not take place until apartheid was overthrown. But by early 1987 the MPLA’s public statements swung back to the former more flexible position, while Cuban rhetoric stuck with the new stance.

The difference might partly reflect a conscious “Mutt and Jeff” act, in which one party plays the “tough guy” and the other appears conciliatory. But it also seems to reflect a concrete shift of interests, with the MPLA focusing on its short-term interest in neutralizing South African aggression, while the increasing unrest within South Africa makes Castro more interested than previously in maintaining a foothold in the region for carrying out other (not necessarily military) operations, and as a venue for supportive contacts with the African National Congress. The tougher Cuban line may also reflect Castro’s concern that Washington’s 1986 decision to aid UNITA and ongoing South African military support of Jonas Savimbi’s guerrilla army make Cuban withdrawal dangerous both for MPLA survival and for Havana’s prestige.

Implications for U.S. Policy
The preceding description of Cuban policy in Angola

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has the following implications for U.S. dealings with the MPLA:

- If, as the historical record implies, Cuban policy on Angola is not simply set by Moscow, and can diverge somewhat from Soviet policy at times, then U.S. policymakers presumably cannot just negotiate with the USSR about Angola, but must take account of, and deal with, the Cuban point of view. While Washington-Moscow discussions are essential because no proposed solution for the Angolan situation will have much chance of success if the Soviets oppose it, any solution that does not respond to Cuba’s special interests also risks failure.

- The history of Cuban involvement in Angola shows that Havana’s most consistent interest is promotion of its international image and influence, and the fulfillment of a self-defined historical “mission.” This suggests that U.S.-Soviet or U.S.-MPLA formulas for obtaining Cuban withdrawal must either provide a face-saving rationale for Cuba’s departure, or include steps to neutralize the actions Cuba might take to hinder the negotiations.

- Events over the past few years suggest that the MPLA will, in general, put its own interests before those of the Cubans. This means that direct bilateral U.S.-MPLA contacts could be useful; though USSR and Cuban concerns must be addressed before a deal can be finalized, such bilateral discussions could structure the diplomatic environment in a manner that would limit Soviet-Cuban options.

- The evidence shows that Cuba is currently benefiting less than previously from its economic involvement in Angola. Yet the willingness to remain seems undiminished. This suggests that the United States should not expect the deterioration of the MPLA’s financial fortunes due to war and the collapse of the oil price to lead to a reduction of Cuban commitment to MPLA defense.

- The evidence further suggests that among the main factors strengthening Cuba’s willingness to stay in Angola have been the deterioration of South African internal stability and increased South African threats to the region, and that U.S. aid to UNITA has reinforced the decision. U.S. policymakers should, therefore, expect that the more southern Africa is inflamed, the more interest Cuba will take in the region. This in turn suggests that the United States should seek to promote regional stability (e.g., by aiding some of South Africa’s vulnerable neighbors) and should be prepared for increased Cuban “meddling” in the event that its efforts fail.

What Cuba Has Learned

The Cuban record in Angola also has implications for future Cuban “adventurism” elsewhere in southern Africa. Although outsiders can only speculate, it seems plausible that Cuba may have drawn the following conclusions from its Angolan experience:

- No matter how rich a country may be in natural resources, and therefore how advantageous long-term military and trade partnerships may appear, internal instability and unpredictable movements in international commodity prices can transform those partnerships from financial assets into financial liabilities. Such developments can be partly offset by the extra bargaining power unprofitable “support of socialist-oriented countries” operations give Cuba in economic negotiations with the USSR, even though the connections cannot be viewed as long-term assets themselves.

- Economic and military realities in Africa are very different from those in Latin America. The underdeveloped nature of African economies, the complexities of African ethnic relationships, and the vastness of the African terrain (and, in the case of southern Africa, the proximity of a relatively well-developed regional superpower whose actions are not constrained by the norms of international behavior) all mean that military and economic management techniques appropriate to Latin America have to be carefully adapted to African conditions, and even then may not work well.

- Cuba has learned that, once having become militarily involved in a conflict, getting out without damaging one’s own international status can prove extremely difficult. After Cuban troops arrive in the host country, they can become hostages to events controlled by other parties, and what is envisaged as a short-term military commitment can turn into an open-ended involvement (if prestige is not to be sacrificed).

- Cuban casualties abroad do eventually cause social problems at home. While they can be justified for a short-term operation, they are hard either to camouflage or to justify over the longer term.

- Military actions in third countries can bring about unintended conflicts with the Soviet Union when factionalism breaks out in the supported group. Thus, while the potential benefit of a military operation is that it can give Havana increased influence on Moscow, it can also create conflicts between the two countries that have the opposite result.

- A southern African ally is not likely to put Cuban interests first. In certain circumstances, local national priorities may threaten that most precious of commodities, Cuban prestige.

- Cuban civilian personnel have generally been well received in Angola. While there are occasional cultural and racial conflicts with the local populace, the record on civilian cooperation has generally enhanced Cuba’s image.

- Taking a stand against South Africa is extremely popular in much of the Third World, and goes a long way toward offsetting criticism of Cuba’s position on controversial issues such as Afghanistan.

Looking Ahead

If Cuba has drawn the above conclusions from its Angolan experience (a contention certainly open to debate), then what are the prospects for Cuban intervention elsewhere in southern Africa?

It is likely that Cuba will now think more carefully before getting as deeply involved militarily in, say, Mozambique or South Africa as it has in Angola. The
difficulties associated with military “adventurism” — specifically the problem of surrendering control over crucial prestige-relevant aspects of diplomacy to the host government, the social effects of casualties, the intractable nature of African guerrilla conflicts, and the danger of getting pulled in deeper than originally intended — all seem better appreciated in Havana today than they were in the pre-Angola era.

The Angolan experience has also demonstrated how “fighting apartheid” can enhance one’s prestige in the Third World. If the internal South African situation heats up, if Pretoria evidences increasing willingness to retaliate against neighbors for perceived aid to ANC infiltrators, and if the spotlight of international media attention focuses ever more intensely on the apartheid system, the attraction of looking like a “knight in shining armor” will be hard to resist.

Obviously, the preferred scenario from Cuba’s point of view would be to play a “heroic” role without getting directly involved militarily. Since Cuba is not in a position to extend much financial aid, it must look to alternatives. Training allies in the use of Soviet arms, while staying well back from the front lines of the conflicts with or within South Africa, is one option. If this option is pursued, maintenance of a Cuban military presence in Angola takes on new meaning, as it offers a convenient site for contacts between Cuba and the ANC. Sending civilian “humanitarian” personnel, such as doctors and teachers, to additional states in the southern region and providing scholarships to students from those states are other relatively risk-free options. Facilitating the “armed struggle” in South Africa by providing technicians to help neighboring states rebuild their infrastructures represents still another way of enhancing prestige and influence while avoiding the risks associated with massive military involvement. Finally, Cuba’s experience in training indigenous civilian personnel to act as local militias may be useful for those southern African states which fear attack by “dissidents” receiving South African training and support. Again, this can be done without sending an actual combat force to the host country.

Discussion of lessons Cuba may have drawn from its Angolan experience, and the way those lessons may affect future Cuban policy in southern Africa, is obviously highly speculative. The above suggestions should not be interpreted as concrete predictions. They do show, however, that both “Cuba as villainous Soviet puppet” and “Cuba as independent hero” stereotypes fail to explain a wide range of elements in past and present Cuban policy. If this is the case in Angola, it may well be the case for Cuba in other parts of the world. Thus simplistic assumptions about Cuban motivations in other regions should be constantly checked against the daily reality of Cuban actions on the ground. If analyses of Cuban policies are not conducted in an atmosphere freed from the constraints of both left- and right-leaning hysteria, Western responses may end up enhancing rather than reducing Cuban influence.